

ELLEINSTEIN REBUKES SOVIETS ON LABOR CAMPS

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[Article by Jean Elleinstein: "Dachau, Kolyma and So Many Others"]

[Text] The district of Kolyma is situated in the extreme Soviet northeast. The "Larousse du XX^e" (in 6 volumes, 1956 edition) states that in the region "there are mining operations of large gold deposits. The mining region is linked by road to the port of Magadan on the sea at Okhotsk." Let us add that it was one of the main deportation sites during the Stalin period and that it continues to be one today. Varlam Chalamov was deported when he was 22 years old in 1929 to a camp in the Solovets Islands. Freed in 1934, he was once again deported in 1937, this time to the district of Kolyma. He spent 17 years there. The "Recits de Kolyma" (published by Maspéro Editions, 326 pages, with a preface by Andre Siniaski) constitutes one of the one of the most powerful descriptions of the world of the concentration camp. Thanks to its sobriety and its literary qualities, it is a work of exceptional density. These stories from "La Maison des Morts" explore the depths of the human conscience in the face of the most difficult conditions a man can confront, as if a slave from the mines of Laurion, near Athens, in the fifth century B.C. had left memoirs, or perhaps an Indian slave from the mines of Potosi in Bolivia during the XVth century under Spanish domination.

Horrible Secrets

We know almost everything about the Nazi camps. They gave up their horrible secrets at the end of the war: the documents are accessible to historians, there is an abundant literature available. That is not at all true of the Soviet camps. "The Gulag Archipelago" of Solzhenitsyn constitutes a large body of knowledge, but there has unfortunately been little written about the tragic history of the Soviet camps. The

Soviet authorities forbid publications on this subject. The archives are closed and most likely do not contain much. The years pass and Minerva's owl sleeps on. We are at the end of the line. The victims of Stalin's terror have nowhere in the USSR, or elsewhere, a monument to commemorate their martyrdom.

We do not know how many there were--10 million, at least, say the authors of "L'URSS et Nous," published in 1978, by Editions Sociales, which is under the direction of the PCF--from 12 to 20 million, as a number of specialists in the history of the USSR believe, many more still according to Solzhenitsyn. Stalin did not burn 6 million Jews, but for him, any Soviet citizen was a potential Jew.

All the Soviet nationalities, all levels of society, all political opinions were represented in the Soviet camps. Some people maintain and perhaps believe that they were not extermination camps, or that one cannot compare these camps to those of Hitler. It is true that there was no Soviet Auschwitz, but there was Kolyma, and Kolyma is Dachau, Buchenwald or Ravensbrück.

Just as the song goes, which is reproduced in the admirable preface of Andre Siniavski, who himself escaped from post-Stalinist camps:

Cursed be you Kolyma
Nicknamed our planet!
You lose you head there without fail
Because you don't return from here.

On the gate, at the entrance to the camp, one could read this inscription: "Work is a matter of honor, of glory, of valor and of heroism," a sinister hypocrisy which the stories written by Chalamov reveal in a special way. One cannot forget the description of the roll calls in the morning or in the evening when, at 50 degrees below zero, numerous death sentences would be read. "The musician prisoners--ordinary common law prisoners--played a fanfare before and after each sentence was read. Feeble light from oil lamps, unable to penetrate the shadows, concentrated hundreds of looks on the thin sheets of paper covered with frost on which were printed the horrible words."

Stalinist Barbarity

Writing these lines, I cannot stop thinking about what the name Stalingrad meant to me as well as to millions of Frenchmen.

It is not only a subway station which comes after Jean-Jaures on the line from La Nation, it is the defeat of Hitler. But Stalingrad cannot excuse Kolyma and hundreds of other camps which carried off millions of victims. Chili, Bolivia, Argentina, Timor and Indonesia, South Korea today remain open wounds on the body of the Western world, but they are military dictatorships which never have claimed to be building socialism.

The USSR should have been different and it still is in the eyes of some people. Only the stories from Kolyma remind us what Stalinist barbarity was like and thus end all doubt.

Man remains a wolf with respect to other men. Reality must be faced. The USSR was for a long time the bad conscience of the French Left, but today our eyes are open. The publication by Maspero of the stories of Kolyma mark in this respect a date which will be important.

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